

# Revisiting Utopia: How a Legacy of Idealistic Plans Resonates with Christchurch's Rebuild

JACKY BOWRING

Imagined landscapes find their form in utopian dreaming. As ideal places, utopias are set up according to the ideals of their designers. Inevitably, utopias become compromised when they move from the imaginary into the actual. Opportunities to create utopias rely largely on a blank slate, a landscape unimpeded by the inconveniences of existing occupation – or even topography. Christchurch has seen two utopian moments. The first was at the time of European settlement in the mid-nineteenth century, when imported ideals provided a model for a new city. The earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 provided a second point at which utopian dreaming spurred visions for the city. Christchurch's earthquakes have provided a unique opportunity for a city to re-imagine itself. Yet, as is the fate for all imaginary places, reality got in the way.

*Jacky Bowring is Professor of Landscape Architecture, School of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Environment, Society and Design, PO Box 85084, Lincoln University, Christchurch 7647, Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand.  
Telephone: +64-3-423-0466  
Email: jacky.bowring@lincoln.ac.nz*

Cities rarely get a second opportunity for a comprehensive redesign. Usually, the slow accumulations of time gradually change the form of cities, and the purity of planning and design yields to the ongoing tweaking and tuning that are part of the urban condition. Major disasters provide opportunities for the kind of comprehensive change that utopian thinking requires. Two examples offer a useful background to the Christchurch experience. The first is the Great Fire of London in 1666, when 176 hectares of the city fabric were razed, including 14,000 to 16,000 houses, leaving only the odd building standing within a mostly empty landscape (Porter, 2011). The prospect for a new vision of the City of London saw a range of plans produced, including those by Robert Hooke (the Curator of Experiments at the Royal Society and Professor of Geometry at Gresham College), army officer Valentine Knight, and most notably architect Christopher Wren (Hanson, 1989). The plans proposed urban forms that were distinctly different from the medieval city that had perished in the fire. However, as Marmot and Worthington (1986) note:

... the rush to rebuild the City so that it could again perform its economic role, inadequacy of public sector finance, the inability of the private sector to raise sufficient capital for land compensation for new roadways, canals and quays, all meant that the City was largely rebuilt along the pre-existing street pattern though with many wider streets (p 217).

The second example contrasts with London's lost opportunity for a move towards the kind of idealised forms that epitomise utopian dreaming. Lisbon's earthquake of 1755 was catastrophic, with the collapse of buildings from shaking, followed by fire and a tsunami. Manuel de Maia, an engineer, developed a list of possible options for the future of the city, including rebuilding as before, widening streets,

## KEY WORDS

*Utopias  
Christchurch earthquakes  
Happy Colony  
Picturesque*

## REFLECTION

placing restrictions on the height of buildings, completely demolishing the downtown area (Baixa quarter) and 'laying out new streets without restraint' to create a modern city, and even moving the city and 'disdaining ruined Lisbon' (Shrady, 2008, pp 153–154). Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo (best known as the Marquês de Pombal) was responsible for driving the rebuild of the city, and recognised that too much had been invested in Lisbon to simply abandon it. Most significantly, he realised the 'singular opportunity for renewal' (Shrady, 2008, p 156). The rebuilt downtown has become a significant heritage site and was placed on the tentative list for World Heritage Sites in 2004 (UNESCO, nd). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) tentative listing citation observes, 'Whilst similar to certain other examples (Edinburgh, Turin and London, amongst others) it is clearly superior in its radical modernity, its functionality, and the architectural quality of its programme' (UNESCO, nd). This 'radical modernity' resonates with the kind of aspirational thinking that is at the core of utopian planning and presents a clear counter to the London outcome. The two cities' experiences following disaster, and the prospect of dramatic change, set up a frame for reviewing the Christchurch experience.

For Christchurch, in the province of Canterbury on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island, it was an intense series of earthquakes that devastated the city. Christchurch was established by English settlers, with the layout reflecting utopian thinking from afar. Christchurch's earthquakes have provided a unique opportunity for a city to re-imagine itself, and the resonances with its past provide insight into the persistence of some aspects of history and the transformation of others. The recognition of heritage has changed over the past few decades to include not just the conventional ideas of important buildings but also a breadth of cultural expressions that are important for their 'aesthetic, historic, scientific, social values, etc' (Vecco, 2010, p 323). This broadening of heritage extends from tangible features to the intangible aspects of culture, including immaterial culture and oral traditions. This is an important development where design heritage is concerned. While many aspects of design history are tangible, including significant buildings and gardens, design is also about ideas and concepts, and these are often transmitted through documents and discussions. Utopian heritage tends to be better represented in the intangible expressions of literature and art than the tangible realm of the physical landscape.

## Context

As a preface to a discussion of the utopian legacy and its reassertion in the rebuild, it is useful to briefly recap on the impacts of the earthquakes on Christchurch. The first earthquake occurred on the Greendale Fault, in the countryside near Christchurch, and produced a 7.1 moment magnitude ( $M_w$ ) shake at 4.36am on 4 September 2010. The quake did not cause any deaths, and for a while Christchurch residents felt relief at having been spared from major tragedy, thanks to the timing of the quake during the very early morning and the building codes, which seemed to have protected against major failures. It did, however, cause widespread damage to the rural areas, parts of the city and the infrastructure including roads and railway lines. It also produced Christchurch's first recent experience of liquefaction, the phenomenon of soils liquefying during

shaking. The September earthquake produced the strongest earthquake ground-shaking recorded to date in New Zealand, with the ground near the epicentre moving at 1.25 times the force of gravity (g).

The worst was still to come. One of the aftershocks from the September quake occurred a few months later, in the middle of a weekday lunchtime, when the previously unknown Port Hills fault produced a 6.3  $M_w$  earthquake, very shallow and very close to the city. Ground-shaking in the February 2011 earthquake exceeded that from the September quake, reaching 2.2 g. Multiple strong and violent shakes caused catastrophic damage and killed 185 people. Since the first earthquake on 4 September 2010, Christchurch has experienced over 13,000 aftershocks. The ground-shaking experienced in the 6.3  $M_w$  quake in February 2011 was extreme and, in world terms, is topped only by the Japanese earthquake that occurred not long after, in March 2011. At 2.2 g, the demands placed on the built environment were severe, and engineers would not normally design structures to withstand anywhere near that degree of shaking. A cordon sealed off the central city from February 2011 until July 2013, creating an uneasy sense of dislocation, with residents alienated from this familiar landscape.

The assumptions about how earthquakes impact on cities are often based on the dramatic images of building collapses shown in the media. While fallen buildings were a major factor in Christchurch's earthquake experience, other phenomena also contributed to the widespread impacts. Rockfall occurred on the hills to the south of the city, which are the remains of an extinct volcano, and at the location of the Port Hills fault. Lateral spreading occurred where land tried to move downhill in the shaking, especially on the margins of the rivers, with large cracks appearing and infrastructure rupturing. Liquefaction erupted silt from the ground, swamping buildings and vehicles.

Because of ground-shaking, combined with rockfall, lateral spread and liquefaction, many buildings that did not collapse in the initial large shakes were subsequently deemed unsafe, or uneconomic, to repair. Vast areas of the city and the surrounding areas are still being demolished, including around 1,500 buildings in the central city, which will amount to about 80 percent of the central business district. The Residential Red Zone contains around 8,000 houses, which have been bought by the Government and are being demolished. These homes are in areas where ground conditions or the threat of rockfall now preclude residential use. The establishment of the Residential Red Zone has been profoundly disruptive in terms of, for example, dealing with insurance issues, and the inevitable stress that comes when people must leave their homes and familiar neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, these abandoned areas are succumbing to nature. One aspiration for the red-zoned land is to have a large park following the Avon River, a possibility that has the potential to create a meaningful legacy for the city from the earthquakes. The waterfront in Toronto, Canada, illustrates how significant such a dramatic change in land use can be, where retreat from the water's edge following the impacts of Hurricane Hazel in 1954 saw built-up areas replaced with a park, including a pedestrian bridge to memorialise the lives lost (Gifford, 2004, p 99).

Five years after the first earthquake in September 2010, much of the central city is still an expansive void. Only a few new buildings have appeared, and the

landscape response is also just beginning. In these intervening years, the spirit of the city has changed dramatically, with temporary architecture and landscapes pioneering new urban forms. It is within this context of dramatic physical change and social upheaval that Christchurch's utopian heritage gained new momentum.

## Utopian thinking

Utopias present possibilities. They embody the aspirations of a perfect world, an ideal life, are vivid expressions of the values of their designers and are often created in a geographical vacuum. The challenge is to find that perfect, untouched, uncontaminated place in which to locate these utopias. Yet the landscape is never benign or mute, and the ideal of a utopia is always at the mercy of the imperfection of humans as much as the quirks of topography, climate and ecology.

The term *Utopia* was coined by Thomas More in his eponymous book of 1516, in which he used the neologism to express literally a 'non-place', and also a 'good place,' reflecting the homophone *eutopia* (More, 2002/1516). Utopias and cockaignes represented yearnings for other places and perfect worlds. While cockaignes were built on the mythical possibility of a land of plenty, utopias required a more structured vision about how a perfect place *should* be. The late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a fertile time of utopian dreaming, including in the work of More, as well as Tommaso Campanella's *City of the Sun* (2009/1623), and the many versions of ideal cities of the Renaissance (see Benevolo, 1980, pp 535–604).

New Zealand has a particularly strong relationship with the idea of utopia. Sargent (2010) highlights how those colonies based on settlement, such as North and South America, South Africa and New Zealand, were productive of utopian visions. Colonies based on exploitation or the removal of problems, including the exporting of convicts to Australia, were not so readily aligned with the idea of a perfect world. New Zealand's resonance with utopian thinking can be related to three conditions: location, timing and emptiness.

First, in terms of location, the country's remoteness is an attribute reinforced by its island form. As a faraway cluster of islands, New Zealand presented the prospect of a perfect, benign world hovering at the edge of the European imagination. Like More's *Utopia*, islands are often the chosen geographical forms for perfect worlds, just as much as they are marginal locations to hide the negative aspects of existence (Bowring, 2011). Anthony Trollope (1882) set his utopian, or more correctly dystopian, novel *The Fixed Period* in an imaginary island near New Zealand, called Britannula, in the year 1980 – which in itself is now a curiosity in the ways that visions of the future become nostalgic once that date itself is history. When Trollope visited New Zealand in 1875, he was evidently affected by being here. He imagined a society where euthanasia is compulsory for people in their sixty-seventh year – the so-called 'fixed period'. Trollope was himself 67 while he wrote the book, and he died that same year.

Samuel Butler was also influenced by his visit to New Zealand, arriving in 1860. He headed for the remotest area in this remote country, up into the back country in the headwaters of Canterbury's rivers, inland from Christchurch. His explorations, including the discovery of the Whitcombe Pass in 1861, provided the basis for his narrative in his novel *Erewhon*. And, like Trollope, Butler wrote

of a dystopia rather than utopia, both authors perhaps shaped in their thinking by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*, which they both read.

A second major influence on the view linking New Zealand to utopia is the timing of European settlement. Alessio (2004) suggests that the New Zealand utopian tradition, in terms of literary utopias, may have been in part connected with the lateness of European colonisation, in addition to its distance from the Old World as noted above. The Goldilocks hypothesis of other possible planets containing life (too hot, too cold, just right) offers a parallel that suggests why New Zealand might have represented the potential for the realisation of a utopia akin to Thomas More's vision. As Alessio (2004) explains:

Unlike the United States (which had developed too many Old World problems), Canada (which was too cold and partly French), South Africa (which was too black) and Australia (which with its penal settlement history had actually begun as a dystopia), New Zealand seemed to have real utopian potential (p 75).

Third is the sense of New Zealand as something of a *tabula rasa*, offering the latent possibilities of a blank slate. Ample access to empty land and the equality of a society unbound by the burdens of a class system opened up real possibilities here. Sargent (2010) notes how letters home to England from New Zealand often referred to workers and farm owners eating at the same table and being served the same food (p 103). As Sargent also highlights, from the time of More's *Utopia*, such imaginings were associated with the idea of colonisation, in which utopias were seen as supplements to existing communities. This seemingly empty land of New Zealand reinforced that perspective. The booster writing and booster painting<sup>1</sup> underscored the representation of New Zealand as a perfect empty place, enticing migrants from the Old World (Bowring, 2010).

One example of a designed utopia in New Zealand is Robert Pemberton's (1895) plan for *The Happy Colony*. The Happy Colony (Figure 1) represents an interesting parallel with Christchurch, as it epitomises the way in which geometrically designed utopias were imagined as arriving onto the *tabula rasa* of a flat, empty plain reminiscent of the city's topography. Pemberton was highly aware of the concept of utopia and even urged his potential colonists to read More's *Utopia*. However, he cautioned that such an ideal could never be achieved under a 'property government' and that it required rational labour instead of wealth as the fundamental driver. The design of the Happy Colony symbolically expresses Pemberton's value system. At the heart of the community is a model farm (Figure 2). Surrounding it are colleges of learning and gardens in the shape of the terrestrial and celestial globes. They give physical form to his concern with how people would learn in the colony.

Pemberton planned his perfect settlement in a precise form, intending to realise it in Taranaki in the North Island of New Zealand. Like much of the planning of New Zealand, it was done without any local knowledge of the landscape or its inhabitants. At one point in Pemberton's book, The Learned Friend asks the Philosopher why he didn't consider America as a suitable location for his intended Happy Colony, to which the Philosopher replies that the continued presence of slavery there is a problem. Instead:

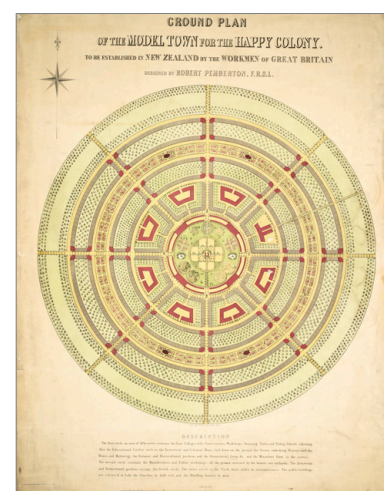


Figure 1: Robert Pemberton, 1854. Ground plan of the model town for the Happy Colony. To be established in New Zealand by the workmen of Great Britain. Designed by Robert Pemberton, FRSL. Charlotte Delia Pemberton delt. London, Day & Son, Lithographers to the Queen [1854]. Ref: Plans-80-0777. (Image: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23149991>.)



I believe I am right in proposing the beautiful island of New Zealand to be the spot for the first stone of the temple of happiness to be laid, as it may be said to be in its infant state, and uncorrupted by any large collection of people; and more especially as it has been held sacred, and kept free from the contamination of the offenders from the mother country ... (Pemberton, 1895, p 25).

Pemberton's utopian dreaming collided with the reality of the landscape for which it was intended. He had urged the workmen of Great Britain to purchase 200,000 acres 'in the neighbourhood of Taraniki [*sic*], now called New Plymouth' (ibid, p 77). One end of the tract was to 'adjoin the seashore [so] that the treasures of the deep may be at the command of the colonists'. Far from a *tabula rasa*, they encountered a diverse landscape, including a volcano, and an already-settled landscape. As Sargent (2010) observes, Pemberton's Happy Colony 'specifies the creation of a community in an area of New Zealand that was heavily populated by Maori as if there was no one there at all' (p 205).

Christchurch's planned heritage is infused with a kind of utopian dreaming. This idea of Christchurch as a utopia was even reflected in Anthony Trollope's (1882) *The Fixed Period*, which identifies 'Little Christchurch' in the future, mid-twentieth century, on the island of Britannula. As the narrator observes:

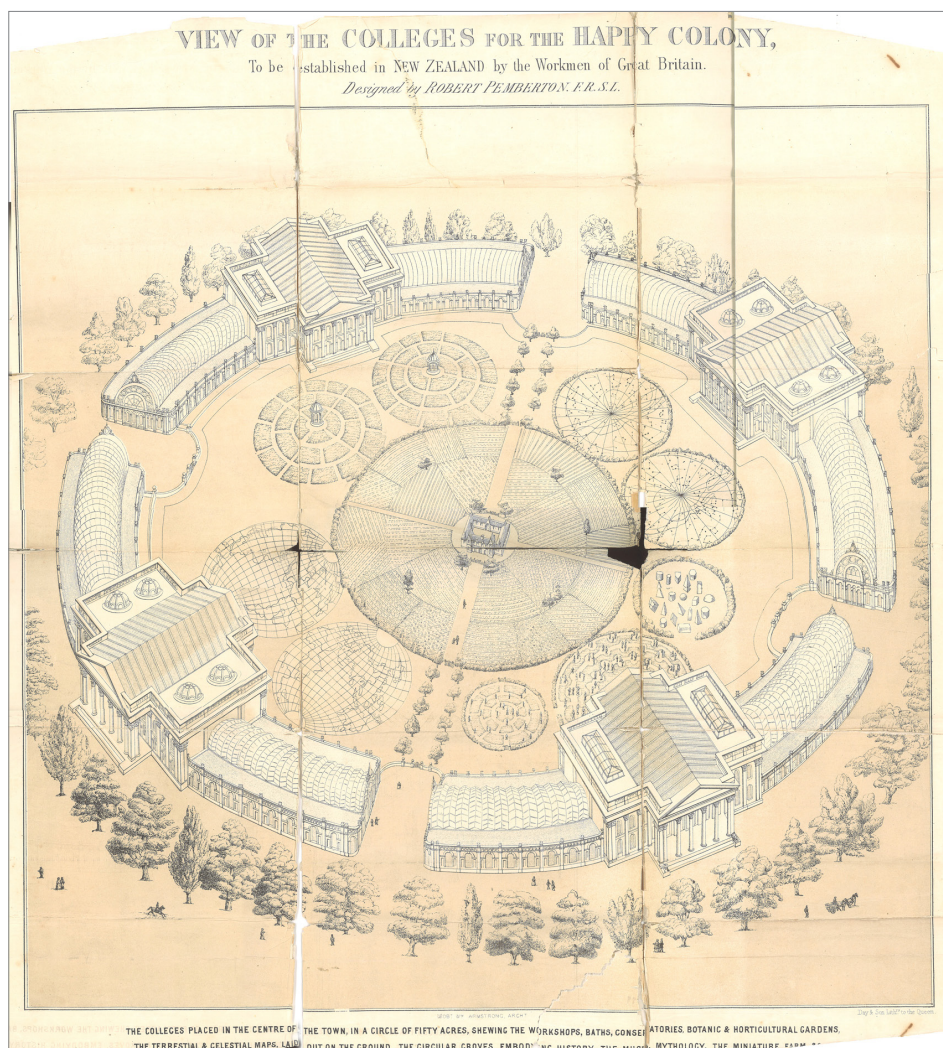


Figure 2: The model farm, colleges of learning and terrestrial and celestial gardens at the centre of the Happy Colony (Pemberton, 1895). (Photo: Author's own, taken of the original book, now in the public domain.)

Everything that human nature wants was there at Little Christchurch. The streams which watered the land were bright and rapid, and always running. The grasses were peculiarly rich, and the old English fruit-trees, which we had brought with us from New Zealand, throve there with an exuberant fertility, of which the mother country, I am told, knows nothing (ibid, unpaginated).

Little Christchurch is expressed as the epitome of Englishness and is the very place where the cricket match between the Britannullians and the visiting English is to be staged. This transposition of a perfect version of Englishness onto the landscape, via the vector of New Zealand, echoes in the observations of another nineteenth-century visitor, Mark Twain, who followed in Trollope's footsteps some 29 years later. After arriving in Christchurch, Twain (2008/1895) remarked:

It was Junior England all the way to Christchurch – in fact, just a garden. And Christchurch is an English town, with an English-park annex, and a winding English brook just like the Avon ... It is a settled old community, with all the serenities, the graces, the conveniences, and the comforts of the ideal home-life. If it had an established Church and social inequality it would be England over again with hardly a lack (pp 134–135).

The layout of Christchurch was again a diagrammatic expression of ideals. While the Happy Colony had a farm at its centre, Christ Church cathedral was the symbolic centre of the city. The city's founder, John Robert Godley, remarked in 1852:

When I first adopted and made my own the idea of this colony, it pictured itself to my mind in the colours of a Utopia. Now that I have been a practical coloniser, and have seen how these things are managed in fact, I often smile when I think of the ideal Canterbury of which our imagination dreamed (quoted in Hall, 2012, p 23).

Jumping forward over a century and a half, the images of the Blueprint Plan developed for the rebuilding of the inner city of Christchurch are emphatically utopian, showing vivid blue-green landscapes filled with happy citizens. These images are reminiscent of Corbusier's Radiant City, Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (Fishman, 1982). The connections between Christchurch and the utopian Garden City are intriguingly intertwined. Howard's book was first published in 1898 as *To-Morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* and then as *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* in 1902, half a century after Christchurch's original plan was laid out (Howard, 2007/1902). Howard was affected by Bellamy's (2007/1888) *Looking Backward* and the ideas of a planned city based on community service. Howard (2007/1902) noted that his:

... scheme is a combination of three distinct projects which have, I think, never been united before. These are: (1) The proposals for an organized migratory movement of population of Edward Gibbon Wakefield and of Professor Alfred Marshall; (2) the system of land tenure first proposed by Thos. Spence and afterwards (though with an important modification) by Mr. Herbert Spencer; and (3) the model city of James Silk Buckingham (p 119).

The plan for Christchurch pre-dated Howard's Garden City, but it strongly reflected the zeitgeist of Howard's vision. The connections were woven into the ethos of utopian thinking of the time. Edward Gibbon Wakefield led organised settlement



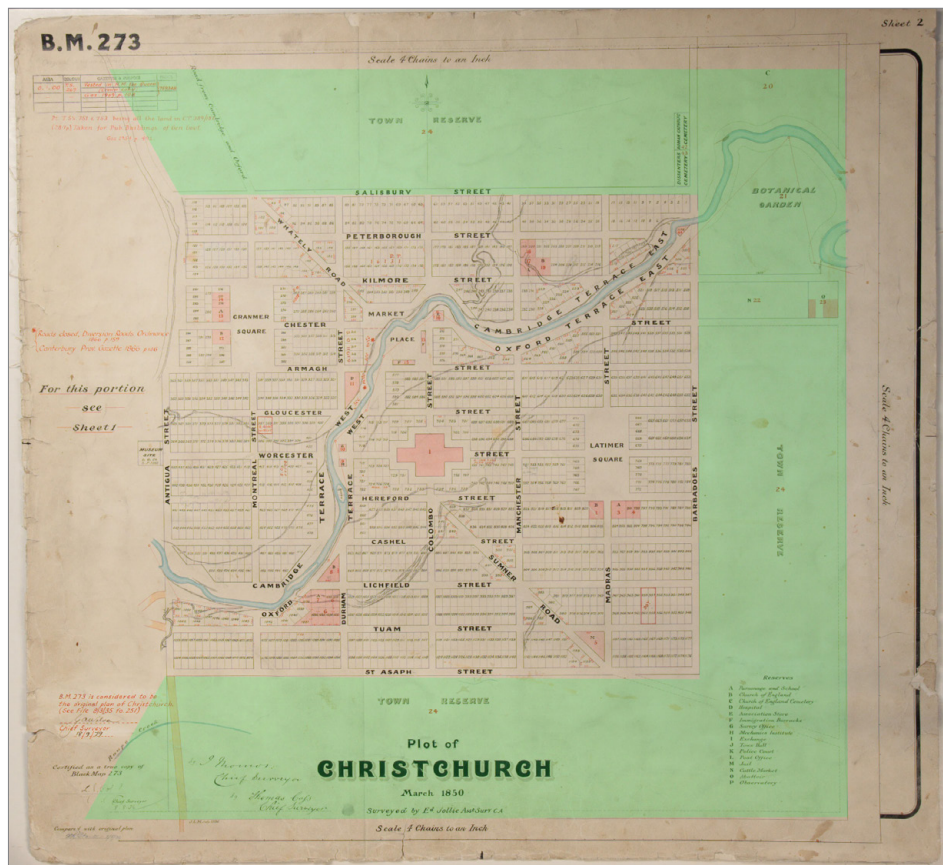
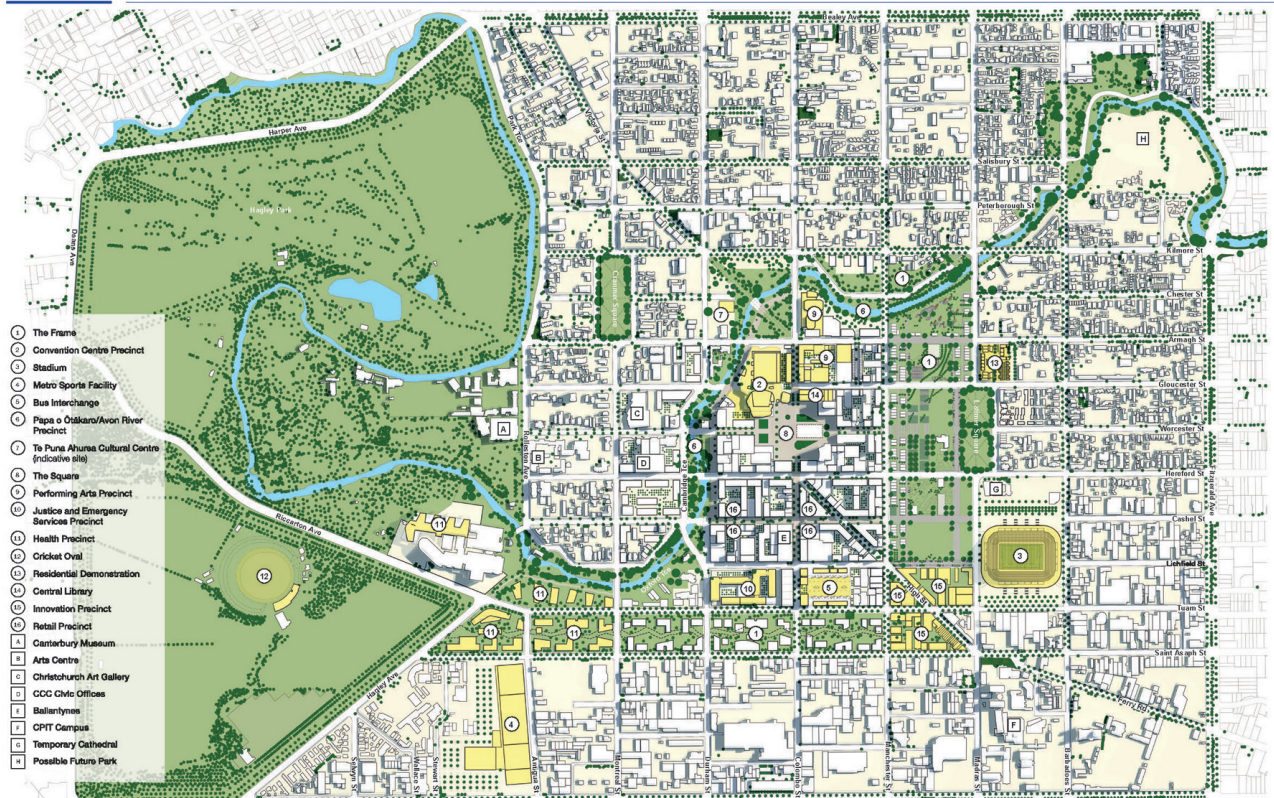


Figure 3: 1850 plan of Christchurch, showing the greenbelt surrounding the city, noted as ‘Town Reserve’ (colour added to highlight location of greenbelt).

in New Zealand and worked with John Robert Godley to found the Canterbury Association, and, ultimately, to create Christchurch as a Church of England settlement. Wakefield’s theory of colonisation was based on the idea of bringing a slice of English life to New Zealand, with settlers who were of good character and Christians. While this underpinned the establishment of Christchurch, as well as other settlements in New Zealand, it was also embedded in Howard’s Garden City theory. Although Christchurch is implicated in Howard’s Garden City ideals, the first time that it was actually called the Garden City is believed to be in 1906, when Sir John Gorst visited for the International Exhibition and reinforced this connection to the Garden City in his comment published in the *Star* (1906).

The greenbelt of the early utopian city layout of the 1850s (Figure 3) is reiterated in the major rebuild document, the Blueprint Plan. The design strategy of the Frame is a version of this earlier greenbelt, at a slightly different scale (Figure 4). The original vision for a greenbelt didn’t last long: 27 years later, the map of 1877 bore no trace of it (Figure 5). The same has happened with the Blueprint’s Frame, where recent images already show a substantial built footprint, obliterating much of the green space shown in the original plan. The incursions into the East Frame are predominantly residential, reflecting one of the challenges for the development of inner-city Christchurch. One of the legacies of utopian thinking in Christchurch is the low-density urban form, with even the city centre being relatively low density by international standards. Moreover, as in many New Zealand settlements, the central city’s main function over the past century has been commercial, with residential areas in the low-density suburban fabric typical of ‘garden city’ models of development.





**CERA**  
Canterbury Earthquake  
Recovery Authority

**C**  
Christchurch Central  
Development Unit

**Christchurch**  
City Council

**Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu**

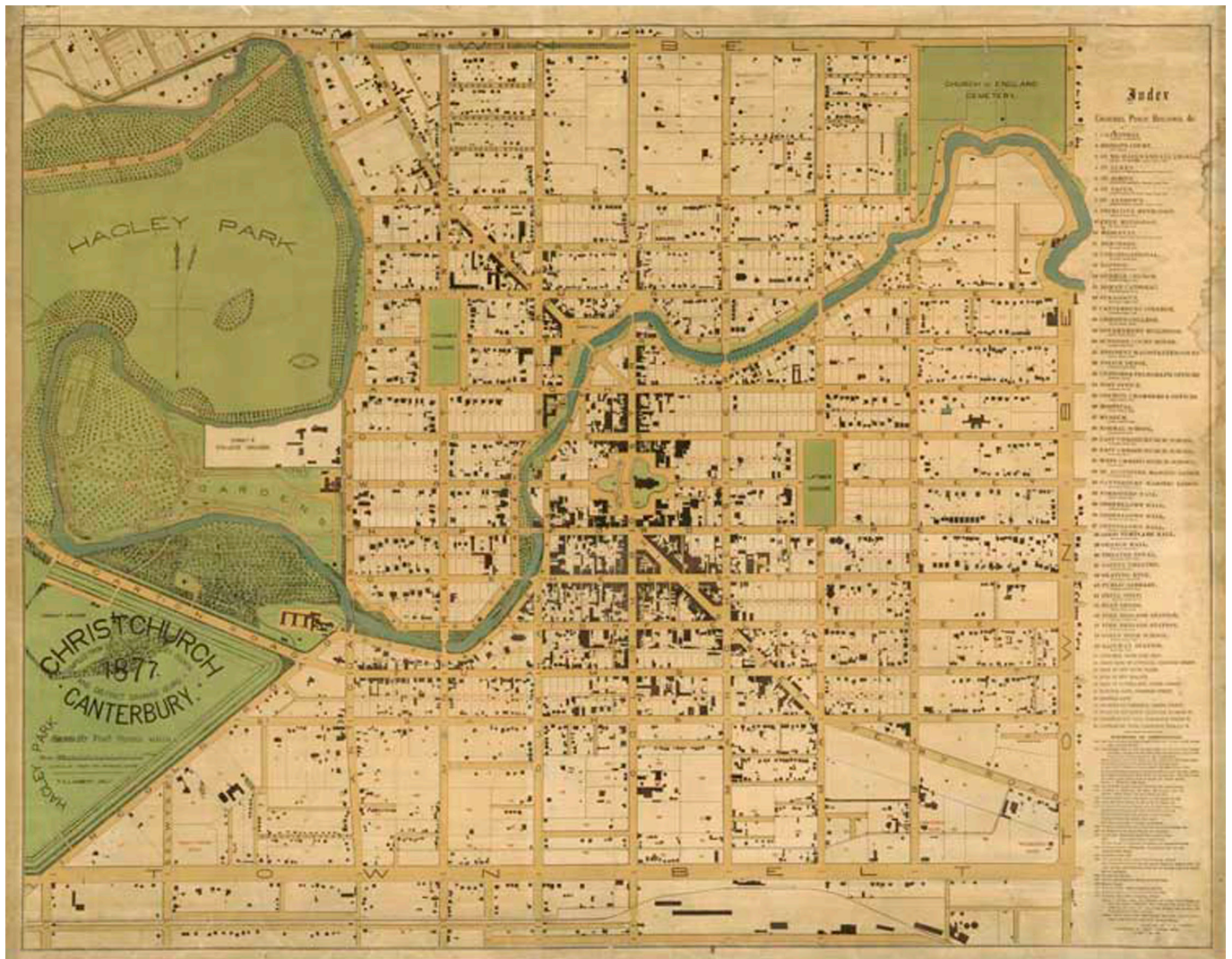
**New Zealand Government**

One of the imperatives put forward for the rebuild of Christchurch is to increase density – particularly residential density – in the city centre. Before the earthquakes, people were only slowly taking up residence in the inner-city developments, and the council was pushing for an increase in inner-city population from 8,000 in 2006 to 30,000 by 2026 (Christchurch City Council, 2006). For many decades, considerable inertia has held back Christchurch suburban dwellers, who have been attached to the lifestyle of low-density living and reluctant to move to the inner city. However, a 2013 study by Opus (Greenhill, 2014) revealed that half of the respondents would be willing to live in the central city after the rebuild.

The vision of an intensively settled and vibrant inner city presents a utopian vision for Christchurch, and this is evolving as a possibility. It is necessary to find a balance between compaction and dispersal, as resilience theory suggests that it is important to spread risk and create multiple centres in case one centre fails (Walker and Salt, 2006). So although polycentrism might, on the one hand, suggest a counter to the idea of the compact monocentric city, on the other, it is a means of fostering adaptability and resilience. While many of the utopian diagrams are strongly hierarchical and concentric, Howard expressed this aspiration to polycentrism in his Garden City vision (Figure 6), providing further connections between the two.

*Figure 4: The Blueprint Plan developed by the Christchurch Central Development Unit. The Frame is indicated by the green linear park around the central city.*





## Utopia and the Picturesque

Utopian planning was complemented by visualisations of landscape in the Picturesque style. As an idealised and perfected version of nature, the Picturesque was an aesthetic convention that resonated strongly with the idea of utopia. Rather than the geometric and ordered utopian cities, the Picturesque provided a different perspective on an ideal world. The Picturesque expressed a sense of a golden age, an arcadia, as expressed in the paintings of artists like Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, and became formulated into a rule-bound approach to landscape design.

At first, the settlers in Christchurch struggled to apply the Picturesque principles they carried with them from England. Lord Lyttelton pointed out the lack of the makings of the Picturesque on the Canterbury Plains on which Christchurch is located, suggesting this landscape could only be described as ‘repulsive’. Nevertheless, the places that afforded the necessary elements of the Picturesque were quickly located, and Dean’s Bush in Riccarton was seen as ‘a spot with which lovers of the picturesque must be pleased’ (Adams, 1853, p 33). Further, as Mark Twain pointed out, Christchurch was ‘Junior England’, a microcosm of a bucolic English landscape inflected with the Picturesque.

Figure 5: The 1877 map of Christchurch, which shows no trace of the greenbelt, apart from the area maintained as a cemetery in the north east. Lambert, T.S. Christchurch, Canterbury [cartographic material]/compiled from data supplied to City Council and District Drainage Board; T.S. Lambert, del. Ref: 834.4492a 1877. (Image: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/20431535>.)



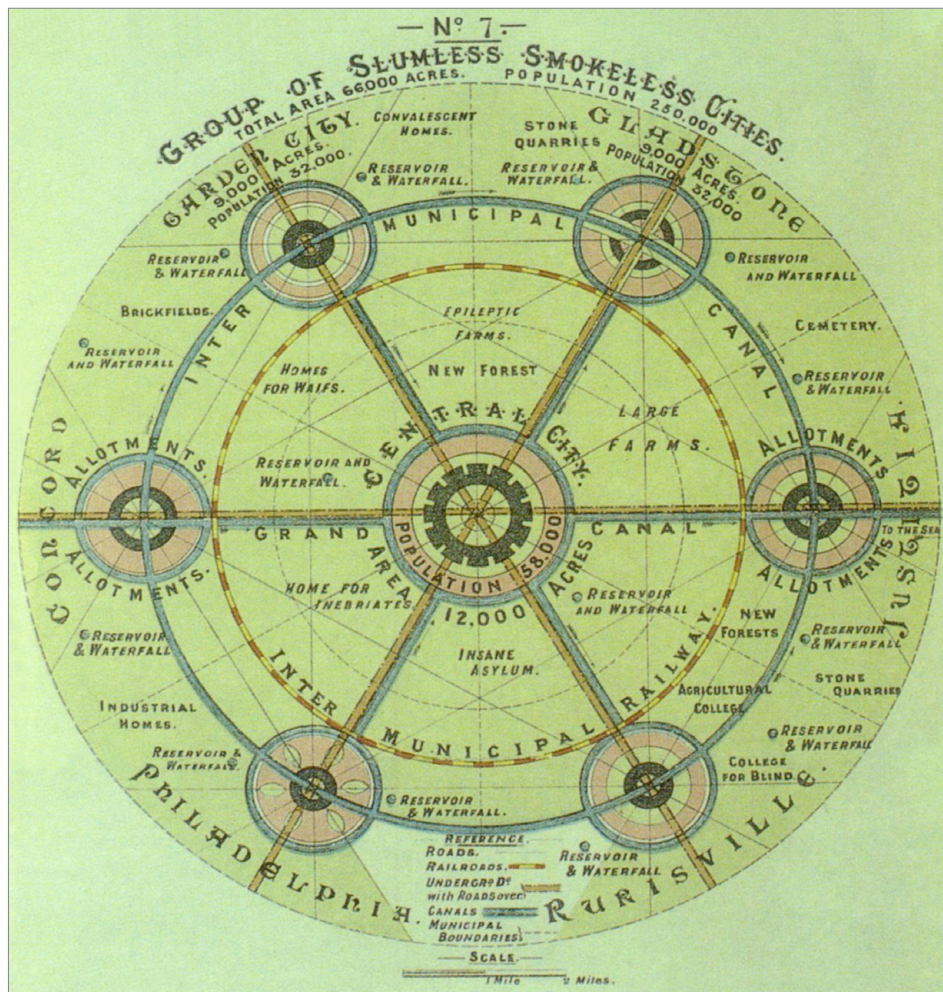


Figure 6: Polycentrism in Ebenezer Howard's vision of the Garden City. 'Garden City Concept by Howard' by Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928) – originally published in *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, Sonnenschein Publishing, 1902, Licensed under Public Domain via Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Garden\\_City\\_Concept\\_by\\_Howard.jpg#/media/File:Garden\\_City\\_Concept\\_by\\_Howard.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Garden_City_Concept_by_Howard.jpg#/media/File:Garden_City_Concept_by_Howard.jpg)).

The iconic imagery of the Avon River winding its way through the city is bound up in Picturesque aesthetics and underpins some of the debates over how the riparian planting should be approached. In the decade or so preceding the earthquakes, the riverbank treatment along the Avon had been the subject of a range of debates – which often degenerated into a 'natives versus exotics' argument. Even in the 1900s the Beautifying Association was already exploring these tensions and opportunities, with the discussion of Barker's Plantation – a garden planted on the banks of the Avon, made up only of native plants (Star, 1900).

The visualisations produced for the rebuild are shot through not only with the sense of utopian idealism noted above but also with the aesthetic conventions of the Picturesque. The Avon River Precinct is one of the Blueprint anchor projects for the city rebuild and continues this earlier pastoral idealism (Figure 7). In their bucolic imagery, their staged social moments, the blue sky and verdant green, the images remind us of the booster paintings that artists like John Bunney produced to lure settlers to New Zealand (Bowring, 2010). Bunney himself never came to New Zealand, but he knew what people liked and he set out his views of the landscape in order to meet the desires for a particular kind of landscape, with sufficient human control to avoid total wildness, and with the sun always shining.



Figure 7: Vision of the Avon River Precinct.



*Figure 8: Visualisation of the Avon River Precinct illustrating the combination of Picturesque aesthetics and indigenous planting.*

The imagery for future Christchurch carries this idealism forward, with the legacies of utopia and the Picturesque embedded within the visions of the twenty-first century city. While the imagery for the future of the river simply echoes the kind of visualisations produced internationally, conversely, they are also heavily inflected with ‘Christchurchness’ and the legacies that bind the city to its design heritage.

In addition, the Avon River Precinct visualisations depict a landscape where the Picturesque legacy underpins the informal riverside indigenous planting (Figure 8). In views like this, the Picturesque has become naturalised; it appears so familiar and is a taken-for-granted compositional device for designing the landscape. This naturalised Picturesque illustrates the transformation from a separate design language, where the indigenous and the imported maintain their autonomy as a ‘pidgin’, to a ‘creole’ where the two languages are interwoven (Bowring, 1995). The familiarity of the Picturesque as a design convention can provide a vehicle for introducing planting that challenges aesthetics and ideals. Nassauer’s (1995) theory of orderly frames for messy ecosystems advocated the use of a familiar frame as a ‘cue to care’ to signal to people that a landscape was intentional. This is particularly important in settings where introducing indigenous vegetation is challenged by public perceptions of ecology as messy. For Christchurch, the Picturesque can provide such an orderly frame. And, as with the visions of utopia, the Picturesque forms part of the city’s design heritage, an unwitting touchstone as the city goes about recovering from the rupture of the earthquakes.

## Conclusion

London and Lisbon experienced starkly different outcomes from the major disasters that devastated their urban fabric. While London reverted to the status quo, Lisbon took a radical approach, akin to utopian thinking. While on the one hand utopian thinking could be considered to reflect the unrealistic ideals of past eras, on the other, it underpins the aspiration for visionary thinking. The very idea that design can enhance wellbeing is core to ideas of utopia, and for a city in the throes of post-disaster recovery this is a valuable perspective.

It is within both the tangible and intangible realms that resilience must be grounded. For Christchurch, both the tangible heritage of the built landscape with its planned grids and the intangible ideas of utopia and the Picturesque provide valuable resources for a city in crisis. Through their familiarity and



aspirational qualities, these elements are part of imagining a new city. Their value in this context challenges some of the critiques made of the baggage from the past and illustrates how a fusion of heritage and innovation can reveal new ways of conceptualising the city and building resilience.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the organisers of *UHPH\_14: Landscapes and ecologies of urban and planning history*, in particular Morten Gjerde, for the invitation to present the keynote lecture on which this paper is based. Thanks also go to Andrew Saniga and Andrew MacKenzie for their vision to bring this group of papers together as a special issue – and for their carrying out the process of review for my paper. And thanks go as always to the anonymous referees for their helpful feedback.

## NOTE

- 1 Booster writing and booster painting were carried out to ‘boost’ the image of the country for potential colonisers, as a kind of propaganda. In the case of booster painting, for example, artists would show fine weather and flat land – an idyllic and inviting scene that would encourage would-be settlers to come to the area.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, CW (1853) *A Spring in the Canterbury Settlement*, London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman.
- Alessio, D (2004) A Conservative Utopia? Anthony Trollope’s *The Fixed Period* (1882), *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 22 (Summer), pp 73–94.
- Andersen, JC (1949) *Old Christchurch in Picture and Story*, Christchurch, Simpson & Williams.
- Bellamy, E (2007/1888) *Looking Backward, 2000–1887*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benevolo, L (1980) *The History of the City* (trans Geoffrey Culverwell), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bowring, J (1995) Pidgin Picturesque, *Landscape Review* 2, pp 56–64.
- (2010) Eternal Sunshine: The Search for Spotless Landscapes. In *Beyond the Scene: Landscape and Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand*, J Stephenson, M Abbott and J Ruru (eds), Dunedin: Otago University Press.
- (2011) Containing Marginal Memories: The Melancholy Landscapes of Hart Island (New York), Cockatoo Island (Sydney) and Ripapa Island (Christchurch), *Memory Connection* 1(1), pp 252–269.
- Campanella, T (2009/1623) *The City of the Sun: A Poetical Dialogue between a Grandmaster of the Knights Hospitallers and a Genoese Sea-captain, his Guest*, Auckland: The Floating Press.
- Christchurch City Council (2006) *Central City Revitalisation Strategy Stage 2*. Accessed 14 August 2014, <http://resources.ccc.govt.nz/files/CCRPStage2-projectcentralcity.pdf>.
- Fishman, R (1982) *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Freud, S (2002/1930) *Civilization and its Discontents*, London: Penguin Books.
- Gifford, J (2004) *Hurricane Hazel: Canada’s Storm of the Century*, Toronto: Dundurn Press.
- Greenhill, M (2014) Would You Live in the City Centre? *Press*, 20 January. Accessed 28 September 2015, [www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/9626971/Would-you-live-in-the-city-centre](http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/9626971/Would-you-live-in-the-city-centre).
- Hall, K (2012) *Laying Out Foundations*, Christchurch Art Gallery Bulletin B.168.
- Hanson, J (1989) Order and Structure in Urban Design: The Plans for the Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666, *Ekistics* 334, pp 22–42.
- Howard, E (2007/1902) *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Jackson, R, Lady Trotter and Bird, C (1989) 1989 NZILA Monier Brickmakers Awards. *The Landscape* 42/43, pp 27–30.

- Lynch, K (1981) *Good City Form*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Marmot, AF and Worthington, J (1986) Great Fire to Big Bang: Private and Public Designs on the City of London, *Built Environment* 12(4), pp 216–233.
- More, T (2002/1516) *Utopia* (trans and ed Robert M Adams), revised ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nassauer, JI (1995) Messy Ecosystems, Orderly Frames, *Landscape Journal* 14(2), pp 161–170.
- Pemberton, R (1895) *The Happy Colony*, London: Saunders and Otley.
- Porter, S (2011) *The Great Fire of London*, Bungay, Suffolk: The History Press.
- Sargent, LT (2010) Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias. In *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, G Claeys (ed), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shrady, N (2008) *The Last Day: Wrath, Ruin and Reason in the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755*, New York: Penguin Books.
- Star (1900) Christchurch Beautifying Association, Issue 6802, 23 May, p 4.
- (1906) *Sir John Gorst: His Farewell to the Garden City*, Issue 8777, 14 November, p 3.
- Trollope, A (1882) *The Fixed Period*. Accessed 28 September 2015, [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/trollope/anthony/fixed\\_period](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/trollope/anthony/fixed_period).
- Twain, M (2008/1895) *Beyond the Equator*, Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com.
- UNESCO (no date) *Pombaline 'Baixa' or Downtown of Lisbon*. Accessed 28 September 2015, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1980>.
- Vecco, M (2010) A Definition of Cultural Heritage: From the Tangible to the Intangible, *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 11(3), pp 321–324.
- Walker, B and Salt, D (2006) *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World*, Washington, DC: Island Press.